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## Tennessee's Promise: Education for All?

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## Tennessee's Promise: Education for All?

### Cover Page Footnote

I have incurred multiple debts through the completion of this article and owe many people more than I can ever offer. First, I would like to thank the administration and staff of the Honors and Scholars Programs at UT. In particular, the guidance and encouragement from Tim Hulseley, Kristina Cantin, and Rebekah Page gave me the confidence to start and finish the project. My thesis advisor, Anthony Nownes, offered valuable feedback and support throughout the entire length of the project. Without him, I would not have been able to turn my wandering thoughts into cogent ideas. I would also like to thank my wife, Emily, who commented on many drafts and was always there during successes and failures. I owe much to my family who was there to listen at all times, day or night - my parents, Jim and Toni, and my brother, Caleb. Finally, the anonymous reviewers of the article provided many helpful comments that made the article better.

## **1. Introduction**

Education is a noble cause. For many, attaining higher levels of education promises a pathway to a better life. The ability to reason, get a better job, and make more money are among those promises. Necessarily, institutions of higher education have become particularly important in the last half century. More people are attending college than ever before, and a larger percentage of the population is granted degrees (Juszkiewicz 1). In short, education has become a major focus in our society. Because it is perceived as a marker of a better life, education is used as an indicator for quality of life. The United States of America's rank on international scales of education is relatively low. Within the country, however, there is a wide variance in the average quality of life from state-to-state. Factors such as income, obesity, mortality, and education are all indicators of quality of life. Tennessee, like many states in the "Deep South," ranks particularly poor in almost every category. Education is no exception. Relatively few people in Tennessee meet national standards for education – the state outranked only West Virginia on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress report (Garrison). Politically, access to higher education has become a focal point for this reason. If Tennessee policymakers were able to increase the number of people attending places of higher education, the state would, conceivably, rank better on quality of life measures. Recently, public policy has been directed at providing better access to higher education. Presuming that lack of financial resources is the main prohibitive factor, current policy is designed to reduce the cost of attendance. In 2015, the Tennessee Promise program was launched. It guaranteed that anyone graduating from high school had the ability to attend a community college with no direct cost of tuition or fees (indirect costs such as books and school supplies are not considered). It ostensibly promises a better future for all Tennesseans. Like many promises, however, it was made without deep consideration for externalities. In this article I will argue that the Tennessee Promise program is a misguided policy because it does not effectively address the education deficit in Tennessee. Moreover, it has led to low completion rates and decreased diversity in higher education, and has failed to address the financial burdens placed on lower income students.

## **2. Background: What the Tennessee Promise Program Is and Where It Came From**

The focus on student success in the state of Tennessee stems from the "Drive to 55" initiative. The "Drive to 55" initiative was designed to get "55 percent of working-age adults in Tennessee with a high-quality postsecondary degree or certificate by 2025" (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017* 7). A number of initiatives have been started to assist in achieving this goal. The Tennessee Promise program is the most comprehensive and most well-known of these initiatives (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017* 7).

The Tennessee Promise program is a financial aid-based initiative, and there are two financial items that need to be described. A “last-dollar scholarship” refers to a financial aid award that is given to cover any remaining tuition and fees after all other scholarships and grants have been applied. It is important to note that a last-dollar scholarship never results in excess funds that are repaid to students. Accordingly, last dollar scholarships are not paid directly to students. Their payment relies on the accurate reporting and billing directly from post-secondary schools. The Tennessee Promise program operates as a last-dollar scholarship. Prior to its implementation, the “HOPE scholarship” was arguably the most well-known, widely applied financial aid program (Trant et al. 202). It, like similar programs in other states, is funded primarily via the state lottery system; it is interesting to note that lottery-funded education is largely a phenomenon present in southern states (Trant et al. 202). While it was and remains a widely used program, the HOPE scholarship differs in the qualifications of its recipients. High school graduates must have a score of 21 on the ACT and a 3.0 high school grade point average. The Tennessee Promise has lower requirements (Trant et al. 203). However, like the Tennessee Promise, the HOPE scholarship is not means-tested, and even the richest of students are eligible for it (Trant et al. 203).

Because the Tennessee Promise program is a state-wide initiative, it is important that I discuss the history of financial aid at the state level. Students in Tennessee have been attending post-secondary institutions for many years. In recent years though, the number of students who matriculate into various colleges has increased exponentially. Coupled with the increasing rates of tuition, the cost of college attendance has become substantial, and many believe college is too expensive. Thus, students at public schools often do not pay “sticker price” for their education (Carruthers and Özek 1). This is due in large part to governmental funding via scholarships and grant money. In the early 2000s Tennessee began to consider the possibilities of lottery scholarships to ease the cost of tuition for high school graduates in the state. What resulted has come to be known as the HOPE scholarship; it was passed in 2002 via a referendum vote (Carruthers and Özek 3). A referendum bill is one that is voted on by the citizenry. With its passage, state lottery funds would be diverted into HOPE scholarships for which students who achieve a 21 on the ACT or graduate high school with a 3.0 GPA are eligible for the funding. Once they are in college, a student has to maintain an average GPA of about 2.75 (the calculations vary based on length of time at an institution) to keep the scholarship (Carruthers and Özek 3). As its name implies, HOPE was effective in funding students who may not have otherwise been able to attend college. In conjunction with the HOPE scholarship, the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship program (TELS) was also established in 2002 (Bruce and Carruthers 31). Most of the money within TELS is devoted to the HOPE scholarship, but there are additional monies that can be allocated differently (Bruce and Carruthers 31).

Interestingly, the TELS (and subsequently, the HOPE) is administered through the completion of a federal form – the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or FAFSA (Bruce and Carruthers 32). It is somewhat unconventional to see a state initiative utilizing federal resources like this. While this may benefit a number of students, current research speculates that this may actually make it more difficult for students from low income families who are unable to file the FAFSA due to its complexity (Bruce and Carruthers 32). This presents a problem, because the goal of financial aid, whether implicit or explicit, is to help those unable to pay something themselves.

### *2.1 The Precursors, and the Drive to 55*

While the Tennessee Promise program is a statewide initiative, its roots lie within a more local setting. A brainchild of Governor Bill Haslam, Tennessee Promise can be traced back to some of his earlier initiatives as mayor of Knoxville. In 2008, the City of Knoxville and Knox County piloted a program called Knox Achieves. It was a last dollar scholarship that allowed graduates from Knox County high schools the opportunity to attend a community college in the area with more financial aid than was previously available (Carruthers and Fox 99). Students were required to meet with mentors, apply for federal aid, and complete community service hours to maintain their funding (Carruthers and Fox 99). These requirements were later translated to the Tennessee Promise program. The program only ran for three years, but it was widely considered to be effective in the community despite only 17.6 percent of high school seniors making use of it (Carruthers and Fox 99). While this program was successful in enrolling more students in community colleges, Carruthers and Fox found that “incentivizing” high school students to attend community colleges made them less likely to attend a four-year university (108). Nevertheless, Governor Haslam extrapolated many aspects of this program when he developed the Tennessee Promise program.

It is widely understood that Tennessee ranks low in many measures of quality of life (e.g., health and education). As a focus during his governorship, Haslam wanted to increase the proportion of Tennessee adults “with a postsecondary degree or credential to 55 percent by the year 2025” (“Drive to 55”). Doing this would essentially increase Tennessee’s education ranking on paper as defined by the current metrics. The “Drive to 55” is a four-pronged program designed to get more people into community colleges and certificate programs. There are four programs, each with a unique goal. They are: LEAP, TN Reconnect, Advise TN, and the Tennessee Promise. Introduced four years ago, “the Labor Education Alignment Program (LEAP) created a statewide, comprehensive structure enabling students in Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs) and community colleges to participate in technical training developed with input from area employers...” (“Labor Education Alignment Program (LEAP)”). TN Reconnect is focused on getting working adults back into college, and Advise TN

is an initiative that aims to improve access to college advising at the high school level (“Drive to 55”). By far the most widely known and utilized program, and my focus in this paper, is the Tennessee Promise program.

## 2.2 *The Program*

Unlike many policies, the Tennessee Promise program is fairly simple to describe. Established in 2014, the official policy is governed by a Tennessee law entitled the “Tennessee Promise Scholarship Act of 2014” and designated as Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-4-708. The Act provides for a last dollar scholarship designed to promote attendance at community colleges. After students apply and receive additional financial aid while enrolled at a qualifying community college or technical school, the Tennessee Promise funds any excess tuition and fees (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017* 8). This is limited to the amount of money that the student owes, because no one is allowed to profit from the funds. In other words, the money is never given directly to the student. Additionally, the funds cannot be used for other associated costs of schooling (e.g., textbooks or spending money). The specific legislation that governs the eligibility of the funds can be found in the Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-4-708(c)(1), which states the general terms and conditions. It is important to note that Tennessee Promise funds can be applied to technical schools and certificate programs in addition to community college tuition. In this paper, however, I will focus solely on the community college aspect of the program as the others are beyond the scope of my research.

The logic behind this policy is fairly simple. The idea is that by increasing enrollment at community colleges, more students (as defined by raw numbers) will complete their chosen degrees. The larger number of students who attain an associate’s degree or higher will also increase the number of adults within the state of Tennessee who have a post-secondary education. Increasing this number will lead to an overall greater percentage of adults in Tennessee with college degrees. Thus, the logic is that the “Drive to 55” initiative will be successful, and the education ranking in Tennessee will increase. Helping the state to complete its “Drive to 55” is the sole stated purpose behind the Tennessee Promise program (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017* 7). Beyond this, the assumed goals that go along with increased education at the state level can be easily extrapolated; namely, increased quality of life for the most people. Knowing the general definition and main goal of the program, it is important to understand the applicative properties of the policy. The funds are not automatic, because there are a number of steps and continuing requirements that must be completed and maintained. It is important that I explain this process thoroughly, because my argument about the policy’s efficacy is in part entwined with the multiple steps students are required to take and the inherent limitations.

The process for accepting Tennessee Promise funds begins the calendar year before a student is expected to matriculate; that is, during the senior year of high school. There is a defined eight step checklist that students must complete before starting their post-secondary courses. Between November the year prior and August the year of matriculation, students must “[c]omplete an online application for the Tennessee Promise program” and then file the FAFSA (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017 8*). Students must then attend two mandatory meetings coordinated by a partner organization; the state of Tennessee has agreements with separate entities that facilitate mentorship programs and comprise these mandatory meetings (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017 8*). After this, students must “[a]pply to a community college”, “[c]omplete and report eight hours of community service”, “[c]omplete FAFSA verification”, and “[e]nroll full-time at a community college” (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017 8*). At this point, Tennessee Promise students are then ready to begin their coursework at one of the 13 eligible community colleges.

Upon matriculation into an eligible community college, students are expected to adhere to some minimal standards. Specifically, students must maintain a 2.0 grade point average and complete eight hours of community service every semester (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017 8*). Assuming a standard 15-week semester, this averages about one half-hour per week of community service. A 2.0 grade point average is equivalent to a “C” grade across 12 credit hours. By definition, two-year degree programs are intended to be completed in a span of two years or four semesters. Tennessee Promise funding is available for five semesters or two and a half years. Because of this, those students may take the minimum amount of coursework to be considered full-time (12 credit hours per semester) and receive funding for the entirety of their coursework. Overall, community colleges in Tennessee had an almost 25 percent increase in enrollment the first year (2015) Tennessee Promise was implemented (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 13*).

### *2.3 The Path to Policy*

To fully understand the scale of the Tennessee Promise program, it is necessary to understand the path it took to become policy. For many, its development from idea to law probably seems incredibly quick. It took less than two years to fully implement. An article in *The Tennessean* provided a good timeline in a recent publication (Tamburin 1):

In 2014

- Feb. 3: Haslam unveils his plan for Tennessee Promise during his annual State of the State address.
- May 13: Haslam signed the Tennessee Promise into law after it was passed by a wide margin in the General Assembly.
- Nov. 1: The deadline for the first wave of eligible students to apply for Tennessee Promise. Officials got almost 58,000 applications.

In 2015

- January-February: Tennessee Promise Students are required to attend [the first] planning meetings.
- Feb. 15: Deadline for Tennessee Promise students to file their FAFSAs.

In August 2015, the first class of Tennessee Promise recipients enrolled in community college campuses across the state.

### **3. Data and Methodology**

This article will heavily utilize recently published facts and figures prepared by the state of Tennessee. Many of the statistics relating to community colleges in Tennessee will be extrapolated directly from the *Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017* prepared in accordance with the law and published earlier this year. Important information regarding student income, success, and diversity is contained in the report. While I would like to analyze completion rates, transfer rates, and lifetime career achievements of Tennessee Promise students, the data is not yet available. Tennessee Promise students have just begun receiving associate's degrees (in May 2017). Most of those who began receiving Tennessee Promise funding in August 2015 can receive that aid until December 2017 – when the research for this paper actually concluded. Therefore, I do not expect to see any academic studies on that cohort for the next few years when those metrics can be accurately assessed. In addition to the aforementioned report, I will rely on previously published research regarding things such as community college success and the effects of financial aid to substantiate some of my claims. As new data becomes available regarding the Tennessee Promise program, I intend to expand the scope of this paper.

### **4. Argument and Existing Research**

Before I get to my argument, I will clarify which aspects of the Tennessee Promise program I will be interrogating. As stated previously, the Tennessee Promise program has only one officially stated goal – to increase the number of adults with post-secondary education to 55 percent of the population by 2025. For community colleges, this means increasing the number of associate's degrees awarded and the number of students transferring in to four-year colleges/ universities. At this time, we do not know if that goal will be achieved. We also do not know if the number of students completing community college programs will increase and stabilize in the next several years. The data is simply not available yet. We do, however, know that enrollment at community colleges has increased substantially; approximately 25 percent increases have been seen state-wide. With this in mind, it is likely that the Tennessee Promise program will do what it was designed to do—inflate the number of people with a college degree of some kind. In summary there will probably be a dramatic increase in the number of these degrees awarded. I do not dispute this. My argument, rather, hinges on the externalities that the program creates. The Tennessee Promise program assumes that additional access to

community colleges is a good solution to the education deficit in Tennessee. I will demonstrate that current research suggests the quality of community college education and the opportunities these colleges provide to their students is suspect. The program also confuses raw numbers with proportional statistics with regard to completion rates at community colleges. Is the allocation of Tennessee Promise funds positively contributing to completion rates in the most efficient way possible? I do not think so. In addition, I will address two issues that the program should consider but does not – diversity on campus and the financial burden placed on the poorest in the state to attend college. The Tennessee Promise program is a misguided policy because it does not solve the education deficit, negatively impacts graduation rates, ignores diversity, and does not address the financial burden higher education places on low-income families.

#### *4.1 Community College Students Do Not Graduate with Bachelor's Degrees*

Implementation of the Tennessee Promise program as an aid to achievement of the “Drive to 55” goal raises an interesting question: Is community college a viable solution to the education deficit in the state of Tennessee? To address this question, I must explain why students attend community college. Temporarily tabling the discussion of financial burdens, what students intend to accomplish when they matriculate into community college is one of the most important factors to be considered. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Education, most students who enter community college do so with intention of transferring to a four-year university, but the majority of them never do (Aldeman). Perhaps this is a result of the type of student that attends community colleges. However, research shows that attending a community college directly affects a student’s likelihood of attaining a four-year degree in a negative way (i.e., the same student is more likely to complete a bachelor’s degree if they start at a four-year college/university as opposed to a community college) (Alfonso et al. 266; Anderson 13). Some research even suggests that the discrepancy of levels of attainment between these two categories of students is about 25 percent – controlling for variables, a student whose goal is to attain a bachelor’s degree is 25 percent more likely to do so by not attending a community college (Christie and Hutcheson 15). Skepticism about the effectiveness of community colleges is not new, as scholarly research dating back to the 1970s, shows that the nature of community colleges is not conducive to academic success (Alfonso et al. 266). Community colleges do indeed differ fundamentally from four-year universities. At community colleges, students are not expected to live on campus, there is no option for long-time enrollment, and student life is often severely lacking.

In addition to the difference in student life and decreased likelihood of additional educational attainment, community colleges have been found to offer a substantially less rigorous curriculum than four-year institutions. According to one

peer-reviewed article, students who transfer from community colleges into four-year universities experience a “shock” that is often:

manifested by a dip in grade point average, this shock may be so severe that individual students drop out. Sometimes they go to another school whose environment is more compatible with their academic abilities and psychological needs; sometimes they abandon a four-year degree as a goal (Townsend 176).

Surprisingly, students who do succeed post-transfer are typically those who are self-reliant and did not require additional resources to cope with the difference in academic expectations (Townsend 188). In order to combat the changes of academic environments and promote success among their students, four-year universities are obligated to make additional academic and social support resources available to transfer students (Alfonso et al. 270). The lifetime achievement of these students is also a cause for concern. Recent research has demonstrated that, on average, a student who begins at a two-year community college will make less money over their lifetime than their four-year counterparts, despite earning the same final degree (Reynolds 358). The lifetime salary discrepancy is great enough to outweigh any of the initial savings one may have by attending a community college versus a more expensive four-year university (Reynolds 358).

#### *4.2 Money Does Not Equal Success in Community College*

Research shows that the largest indicator of student success in community college funding schemes is not actually the financial support. According to a case study conducted by Carruthers and Fox that examined Knox Achieves, “half of participants” in the program “receive[d] no scholarship aid from the program,” and “non-financial hurdles are critical channels through which programs like Knox Achieves works” (108). The minimal funding that last-dollar scholarships provide to needy students is actually a relatively minor factor in student success; this calls into question the responsibility of spending so much on what probably is not proportionally effective (Carruthers and Fox 108). Money would be better spent in developing programs to help needy students apply for other aid and address the multiple burdens associated with college attendance. Different, smaller community college tuition programs do exist in other localities. For example, the City University of New York implemented the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) (Page and Scott-Clayton 17). However, its success is often credited to the large amount of funds invested into a plethora of programs such as “free transportation, intensive advising, career services, special seminars, and other supports” that are inherently expensive (Page and Scott-Clayton 17).

#### *4.3 Graduation Rates*

Some students attend community college in the HOPEs of attaining a degree/certificate as their ultimate goal. Community colleges across Tennessee award associate’s degrees which typically take two years of coursework to attain.

While definitively less valuable than a bachelor's degree, an associate's degree does represent a pathway to greater career outcomes for many – though this idea may also be disputed due to the decreasing value of an associate's degree (Reynolds 358). If community colleges were good at awarding these degrees and promoting success in their student bodies, this would represent a valid reason to divert funding to their programs. Unfortunately, they are not. The highest graduation rate in the state in 2014 was 22 percent, at Pellissippi State Community College. The number drops to as low as 6 percent at other community colleges (Cohen). On average, only 13 percent of students who enter community colleges in Tennessee are successful (Cohen). It would appear that community colleges are not particularly well-equipped to meet the needs of their students to promote higher levels of education. This presents a problem for programs such as Tennessee Promise. Because students are not obligated to complete a degree in exchange for financial aid, the state stands to lose a great deal of money in the sheer number of students who begin at community college and then do not complete their studies. Nationally, there has been no other program like Tennessee Promise – its closest counterpart is its predecessor, Knox Achieves. Researchers warn that the successes of that program were not due entirely to the financial aid provided (Carruthers and Fox 97). Additionally, there is speculation that the small size of that program also contributed to its success (Carruthers and Fox 97).

Upon implementation of the Tennessee Promise program, community colleges across the state saw a roughly 25 percent increase in enrollment (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017* 13). This is, by any measure, a substantial increase in a very short period of time. Community colleges, which already struggle with accommodating their students, would need to make a variety of organizational changes to cope with this increase. The research on how community colleges made these changes is somewhat disturbing. A recently published study found that, administrators at community colleges “repeatedly voiced concern[s]” about “ill-equipped infrastructure, student misinformation about eligibility requirements, and the lack of implementation subsidies from the state to support unplanned expenditures” (Littlepage et al. 6). The same study discovered that administrators at one community college decided to make no changes to their orientation program despite the radical policy changes that Tennessee Promise brought about (Littlepage et al. 6). Other community colleges have made changes in the past two years, however. Vol State Community College, for example, began mandating orientation for students and facilitating additional staff at those orientation meetings (HOPE 5). While these changes are present there, they are largely already existent at other institutions of higher education (four-year universities). These factors mean that Tennessee Promise is pushing more students than ever before into institutions that are unable or unprepared to accommodate them.

#### *4.4 Other Effects of Financial Aid Programs*

Shifting focus to studies specific to communities in Tennessee, there has been substantial research into the effects that other financial aid programs have had. In Tennessee the most widely used financial aid program is the HOPE scholarship. It, like Tennessee Promise, is funded via the state lottery system. However, its application differs significantly from that of Tennessee Promise. For example, students can apply funds to four-year universities as opposed to restricting them to two-year schools. Research has found that programs which allow students more choice in selecting the college they attend leads to the selection and admission into higher quality programs (Bruce and Carruthers 42). The HOPE scholarship consistently moved students away from choosing a two-year college to selecting a four-year university. Having established the negative aspects of community colleges, programs that give students the ability to choose other programs are certainly positive. One can infer from this data that programs like HOPE are certainly worth the cost because, although community colleges are cheaper than four-year universities “in terms of direct costs like tuition”, four-year universities are a better long-term investment (Bruce and Carruthers 43). The question arises, however, of what happens to college students who lose the HOPE scholarship for any reason. Research on this issue has been positive. Students who lose the HOPE scholarship are not likely to drop out (Carruthers and Özek 1). The reason for this is that most of the students who lose their aid are not dependent on it to complete college (Carruthers and Özek 12). As stated before, the “students who leave college in the wake of losing \$1500-\$5500 in annual HOPE aid likely do so at great expense to future earnings” (Carruthers and Özek 12).

To summarize this part of my argument, community colleges are not a feasible solution to the education deficit in Tennessee. Most students enter community colleges with intentions to transfer to a four-year college/university, but those who matriculate into community colleges are less likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree than if they had started at a four-year college/university. Beyond that, students only wanting to obtain an associate’s degree are unlikely to do even that considering the abysmal graduation rates and inability for community colleges to properly accommodate students. In addition, students who do attend community colleges make less money even if they obtain a bachelor’s degree. Furthermore, the examples of successful community college programs rely on investment beyond simply providing tuition and fees coverage. In summary, community colleges do not promote education on the whole – they erode educational achievement. The latter half of my argument will focus on two areas where current literature does not exist. Though they are not stated goals of the Tennessee Promise program, promoting diversity and improving access to low-income students should be a tenet of any policy that aims to get more people into college. After describing the importance of these two aspects, I will use official reports from the Tennessee

Higher Education Commission to show that the Tennessee Promise program is negatively affecting them.

#### 4.5 Diversity

Diversity is arguably a good factor in education, and it benefits more than just marginalized groups. Multiple studies show that increased diversity has a number of positive effects. Positive racial attitudes are positively correlated with increased diversity (“Study Shows Benefits of Racial Diversity on Campus” 40). Among students who are white and score lower on standardized tests such as the ACT, interaction with diverse groups of people strongly supports development of critical thinking skills and other cognitive abilities (Loes et al. 19). Because of the predication on lower scoring students, diversity would be particularly beneficial in community colleges in Tennessee, where the average ACT score is significantly lower than it is at four-year institutions. Diversity, however, cannot be addressed metaphorically or philosophically. It can only be experienced in a first-hand way. In other words, discussing controversial topics or opinions held by historically underrepresented groups does not offer the same benefits as having a diverse student body (Loes et al. 21). An article in *States News Service* published in May 2017 described why students need to experience diversity when they matriculate into college:

Prior to attending college, many students spend their lives in the same local community. Lack of exposure to different ways of thinking and customs can hinder them. Classrooms that are more homogeneous... tend to be less creative and insular.... Living and studying among people from different cultures and backgrounds helps to avoid groupthink in the classroom... - a phenomenon where one mindset dominates and drives everyone towards conformity rather than creativity.

Because the Tennessee Promise is designed to increase access to community colleges, it should improve and encourage access to minority students for a multitude of reasons.

Approximately 17 percent of the Tennessee population is black (QuickFacts). In community colleges in 2014, the proportion of black students was approximately 19 percent, but in 2015, the proportion was only 14 percent (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017* 11). While this may not be a large discrepancy between community college populations and state demographics, any decrease should be noted so that it does not become part of a larger trend. Additionally, the number of white people attending the 13 community colleges in Tennessee increased from 70 percent to 74 percent. Though this may seem like a marginal increase, it could very well represent a trend of decreasing diversity at community college campuses. Any program that benefits populations of white people more than minority groups should be called into question. Historically, white people have not faced the same barriers to education that minorities have.

While it may be acceptable to implement a policy that does not affect diversity positively or negatively, I would argue a goal should always be increased diversity. I would also contend that any policy that negatively affects levels of diversity is ill-suited as a solution to low levels of access to higher education.

The second factor that any financial aid program should consider is who is utilizing the funds. The basic premise of the Tennessee Promise program is that the already low cost of tuition and fees at community colleges is prohibitive to a population of people. Necessarily, this population of people is among the lowest income earners of the state. Ideally, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission would publish the level of income for Tennessee Promise recipients. Unfortunately, they do not, despite the fact that all Tennessee Promise recipients are required to report income via the FAFSA. Because I cannot evaluate these income levels, I will utilize existing data on Pell Grant recipients who are also Tennessee Promise recipients. The Pell Grant is a federal aid program that awards money to students based on a variety of factors, but the main consideration is family income (Gobel). The Pell Grant is awarded after the FAFSA is filed. The fact that both programs discussed are determined via the FAFSA, the Pell Grant serves as a proxy to describe the type of student that is receiving the aid. In theory, Tennessee Promise recipients should also be receiving a large proportion of Pell Grants, which would indicate aid going to the neediest of people.

According to the *Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017*, the number of “Full Pell” recipients that are also Tennessee Promise recipients is 34 percent (11). The number of “Full Pell” recipients in all Tennessee colleges in Fall 2015 is 33 percent - a 7 percent decrease from the year prior (*Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2017* 11). This is a significant decrease in the number of the poorest students who are attending community college. From this initial statistic, the Tennessee Promise does not seem to be effectual at providing better access to the neediest in the state of Tennessee. Perhaps even more alarming, the number of students attending community college in 2014, 2015, and Tennessee Promise students who are receiving any amount of Pell Grants has held steady between 50-60 percent. Approximately half of all students who receive Tennessee Promise funding are not eligible for the Pell Grant (i.e., a large proportion of students are not needy). For the purposes of this paper, I consider those ineligible for the full Pell Grant to be of middle class socioeconomic backgrounds.

Understanding these aspects of educational quality, lifetime attainment, diversity and income, I can then describe what the average Tennessee Promise student looks like. Essentially, there is a strong possibility that a randomly chosen Tennessee Promise student is neither racially diverse nor poor. They are also unlikely to complete the program they begin. In summary, a lot of financial resources are being allocated to people who do not need them. For this reason, Tennessee Promise is a misguided policy. Of course, increasing the raw number of

students entering into community colleges will likely increase the raw number of degrees awarded. However, the unintended consequences certainly outweigh Tennessee Promise's short sighted goal. As the adage warns – “penny wise, pound foolish.”

## 5. Conclusion

Higher education has been a focal point in Tennessee's public policy – rightfully so, given the state's low rankings in educational attainment. Rooted in a history of local initiatives, the Tennessee Promise is a statewide program that aims to increase rates of education in the state. The primary goal is to substantially increase the number of people in Tennessee with some college degree; usually, this takes the form of an associate's degree. As I have demonstrated, this is a misappropriated way in attempting to solve the education deficit. Beyond this, the Tennessee Promise program ignores the value of other preexisting financial aid programs. It also has had unintended consequences. Namely, students with true financial need are not able to utilize the funds, and racial diversity amongst institutions of higher education could be negatively affected. Due to its recent implementation, aggregate data on Tennessee Promise students is not yet available, but the existing research does not provide any positive predictions. Despite the warnings that scholarly research has provided on the utility of community colleges in our society, the government has chosen this path to solve what it is a critical issue in the state. Tennessee policymakers had and still have many other options to reinvest the substantial funds that Tennessee Promise is using. This program does not promise education for all, it serves as an indictment of our shortfalls in education and presents an unclear verdict for the future.

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